

# TF Geronimo COLT in OEF

## Thwarts Attacks: an FO's *Dream*

**W**hile operating in the austere mountainous border region of southern Khowst Province, Afghanistan, the Combat Observation Lasing Team (COLT) of Task Force Geronimo, 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, thwarted attacks on a border checkpoint and, using the fires of M119A2 howitzers and Marine aviation, neutralized the enemy. The COLT leaders—Staff Sergeant (SSG) Jesse J. Occhino, SSG Brandon E. Thompson and Specialist (SPC) David A. Larson—accomplished their core combat task, defining the continuing relevance of cannon artillery in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

On 28 May 2004, two platoons of four 105-mm howitzers from B Battery (*Eagle Battery*), 377th Parachute Field Artillery Regiment (B/377 PFAR), and TF Geronimo's COLT were tasked to support the Khowst Provincial Forces positioned on a border checkpoint. During their mounted movement and before reaching the preplanned position area for artillery (PAA), all convoy elements saw a heavy volume of enemy indirect fires accurately impacting to their south, precisely within the border checkpoint they were tasked to support.

After conducting an immediate halt, or "hip-shoot," to establish an Artillery firing capability, many *Eagle Battery* Artillerymen heard SSG Occhino say, "Let's get on top of the border checkpoint now; we will make the difference; this is our job. If we move up to that border checkpoint, we can pinpoint the enemy launch sites and counterfire!"

Shortly thereafter, the TF tactical operations center (TOC) issued a hasty fragmentary order (FRAGO) to the battery commander approving the movement of a small element to collocate with Khowst Provincial Forces on the border checkpoint. The fire team-sized element began to move immediately with low signature to link up with Afghan forces and assess the situation at the checkpoint.

The element consisted of the two-man COLT, battery gunnery sergeant and battery commander for command and control (C<sup>2</sup>). They had to clear all fires and deconflict airspace. Cannon artillery in position, ready to fire and laid on a



The Task Force Geronimo Combat Observation Lasing Team (COLT) and C<sup>2</sup> element was (left to right) B Battery, 377th Parachute Field Artillery Regiment Soldiers SSG Jesse Occhino, SPC David Larson, SSG Brandon Thompson and CPT Shane Morgan.

priority target included four M119A2 howitzers with the full range of 105-mm munitions. The conditions were set to facilitate rapid counterstrike operations and allow SSG Occhino to deliver on his promise to "make the difference."

At 290429ZULU May 2004, the border checkpoint received a very accurate rocket attack for the fifth day. Coinciding with multiple rockets impacting within the checkpoint and ranging from 25 to 75 meters of their position, SSG Occhino flawlessly executed his battle drill and moved under enemy indirect fire to best position his element. In turn, SSG Occhino and SSG Thompson (battery gunnery sergeant), who were armed with multi-band inter/intra team radios (MBITRs), binoculars, a static ground vehicular laser locator designator (G/VLLD) and an LH-41C handheld laser rangefinder, began the first of many calls-for-fire. The calls were streamlined into *Eagle Battery*'s fire direction center (FDC).

Tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) included preplanned priority targets and shift-from-known-point missions that already were lased and computed by the FDC. Establishing an informal airspace coordination area (ACA) with lateral separation and real-time updates to shift the gun-target line, as necessary, allowed the artillery and attack aviation to mass fires on the enemy's firing positions.

After several hours of two-way artillery and attack aviation fires against a highly skilled enemy force, TF Geronimo forces

neutralized the threat.

The TF delivered 53 artillery high-explosive (HE) munitions and controlled the use of many attack aviation munitions. Upon sending his end-of-mission target transmission to the FDC and receiving his battle damage assessment (BDA) from the Super-Cobra helicopter pilots, SSG Occhino stated "Wow...that was a forward observer's dream!"

For about a week before *Eagle Battery* and the TF's COLT arrived, the checkpoint had received more than 100 107-mm and 122-mm rocket attacks against which the Khowst Provincial Forces were defenseless. In short, the Afghan Khowst Provincial Force soldiers did not have the benefit of the extended range of cannon artillery. Moreover, the Khowst Provincial Forces' frustration was amplified by the fact they often could observe the enemy launch sites but could not strike them. On 29 May, things changed.

Performing as joint fires observers (JFOs), the COLT integrated *Eagle Battery* howitzers with the massed effects of Marine Corps attack aviation and facilitated the decisive engagement and defeat of hostile enemy forces. JFOs, 105-mm cannons and attack aviation made the difference in this fight, and in turn, enabled SSG Jesse Occhino, SSG Brandon Thompson and SPC David Larson to deliver on their promise.

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